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PROHIBITION AND CIVILIZATION

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

PROHIBITION, as a policy, has had a great deal of public attention, but the kind of civilization connoted by prohibition has had very little. This is unfortunate, because the general civilization of a community is the thing that really recommends it. The important thing to know about Kansas, for instance, is not the statistics of prohibition—as most writers on the subject seem to think—but whether one would really want to live there, whether the peculiar type of civilization that expresses itself through prohibition is really attractive and interesting.

The Reverend Floyd Keeler, for example, writing in the July *Atlantic*, devotes a whole article to proving that, in Kansas, prohibition does prohibit, within limits. This is not without interest, of course; still, it would seem much more interesting and truly practical to tell us what life is like under a general social theory of negation and repression: for such is what life in Kansas comes to. That, after all, is the determining test. Burke says—and I earnestly commend his words to the advocates of our grand new policy of Americanization, whatever that means: “There ought to be in every country a standard of manners that a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. *For us to love our country, our country ought to be lovely.*” No one can fail to remark, in the present war, the immensely superior spirit of the French in defense of a truly lovely civilization. The final test, indeed, of any civilization,—the test by which ultimately it stands or falls,—is its power of attracting and permanently interesting the human spirit.

Concerning Kansas, therefore, the question is not whether prohibition prohibits, but whether, under prohibition, the general civilization is such as “a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish.” Kansas, as I showed in my

former paper, is essentially Puritan: and the secret of Puritanism's downfall was in its failure to meet this test. An English critic of Puritanism gives a vivid example of the precise line of criticism by bidding us imagine Shakespeare and Virgil coming over on the *Mayflower*, and think what intolerably bad company they would have found the Pilgrim Fathers! William James was probably as distinguished a lover of the humane life as America ever produced; and we all remember with amusement his naïve cry of relief at leaving the vapid and orderly perfections of Chautauqua, that vast playground of middle-class Puritanism. Well, similarly, one has but to imagine some disinterested lover of human perfection like William James making a candid examination of the civilization of Kansas, and one knows at once what the verdict would be. It is beside the point to say that Kansans would not agree to this verdict: that Governor Capper, who "really knows Kansas," would repudiate it: that Mr. William Allen White would treat it lightly and Mr. Walt Mason make a jingle about it. There is a standard set for such matters by the best reason and judgment of mankind; and in any disinterested estimate of a civilization, a verdict of William James would be apt to come nearer the mark of general human experience than one of Governor Capper or Mr. Mason, or even, probably,—though I do not like to think so,—than one of the accomplished Mr. White.

By far the greater part of the power and permanence of a civilization resides in its charm. It is surely noticeable, for instance, that wherever French civilization once strikes root, it remains forever. The border provinces, the Province of Quebec and our own State of Louisiana, are as obstinately and unchangeably French as ever they were. The reason is that French civilization satisfied the human instinct for what is amiable, graceful and becoming, and men cleave to it. It appeals to them as something lovely and desirable, rather than as something merely rational and well-ordered, which is the chief appeal of the German type. Under the State Socialism of Germany one is continually confronted with the social relations and consequences of practically every move one makes. The principle of prohibition is extended to cover an endless range of conduct (though, significantly, drink is exempt). The home scheme of social life is ordered with excellent and obvious rationality, but it is devoid of charm, it has no savor, and all its reasonableness

cannot make up for the deficiency, cannot make the normal spirit really enjoy it. One feels the same restlessness and perverseness under it that William James declared he felt under the régime at Chautauqua. One doubts whether such smooth-running social order is worth having at the price. I remember some years ago, after a long time spent in observing the ghastly perfections of German municipal machinery, I came home ready to rejoice in the most corrupt, ring-ridden and disreputable city government that I could find in America, if only I might draw a free breath once more and forget the infinity of things that are *verboten*.

Such is the universal perversity of human nature, and it is something to be reckoned with. In my mind, it has always been the one insuperable objection to Socialism. The Socialists are at a loss to see why we do not all fall in at once with their orderly and rational scheme, just as Mr. Keeler, speaking in the *Atlantic* for the people of Kansas, wonders why we do not all fall in with prohibition. The answer is the same in both cases. Men look at the essentially Socialistic civilization and the essentially Puritan civilization, give them due credit, acknowledge their virtues, and then pass them by. Nay, further: we look at the type of people produced by these civilizations, we consider them attentively, and then make up our minds quite firmly that no amount of social benefit would be worth having if we had to become like them in order to get it.

The civilization of Socialism, however, is rational. It has that sound merit, just as civilization of one Latin type has the merit of beauty and amiability. But Puritan civilization has neither. It has all the flat hideousness of Socialism, without the rationality which Socialism has managed to redeem by its contact with great world-currents of thought. Puritanism is essentially a hole-and-corner affair, with its arid provincialism untempered by contact of any kind. Its ideals are grotesque and whimsical; its methods are unintelligent—the methods of dragooning. Mr. Keeler must forgive my plain speaking; it comes of a sincere desire to resolve his doubts about the sanity or integrity of the brute mass of us who look unmoved on the progress of prohibition in Kansas. We cannot accept prohibition without accepting the civilization that goes with it, for prohibition cannot stand on any other soil. To get even the attenuated benefit of prohibition in Kansas, our community-life must become more or

less like that of Kansas, and we ourselves more or less like Kansans; and this is wholly impossible and unthinkable.

Indeed, it is from precisely this condition that the general spirit of America is struggling to emerge. The original implantation of Puritanism, with all its crudeness and rawness and lack of imagination, for a long time dominated our life and narrowed our ideals. But its influence is rapidly passing away. As evidence of this, it is most encouraging to note the disappearance of the old unintelligent forms of partisanship and sectarianism, and the steady fixture of the right of final private judgment upon public affairs. Our institutions have become more rational, flexible and responsive, and our methods more enlightened. Even in our prison and police methods we have already swung a long way from the Puritan theory of punishment towards the more civilized theory of reclamation.

Along with these changes there has come the perception that society should leave to each person an ever-increasing maximum portion of his own life to regulate for himself. This is not only true with reference to organized or statutory interference, but with reference to the arbitrary and unreasoning pressure of public opinion. The Puritan theory of "thy brother's keeper" has been largely disallowed. We scarcely realize the extent of these wholesome changes in our social life until our attention is called to them by some recrudescence of the Puritan spirit. Not long ago, for instance, the Superintendent of Police in Chicago swore in half a dozen policewomen to suppress what Mr. Howells once called "public billing and cooing" in the parks. Some members of the Virginia legislature put in a bill to ban the short skirt and low-cut waist. The time was, not more than twenty-five or thirty years ago, when whimsies and antics like these on the part of public officials went almost unquestioned—when our theory of public office was practically that of a New England village beadle in Colonial times. Now, however, they appear to us as morbid and silly extravagance, carrying their own sufficient condemnation in their sheer absurdity. And yet it is well worth while to note such happenings, because they indicate the temper of Puritanism so clearly, and show the length of nonsensical hypocrisy to which it is ready to go.

The advocates of prohibition ought to get a clear grasp of the fundamental objection to their theory, and meet it

with something more substantial than feeble talk about the influence of "the liquor interests." Our objection is to Puritanism, with its false social theory taking shape in a civilization that, however well-ordered and economically prosperous, is hideous and suffocating. One can at least speak for oneself: I am an absolute teetotaler, and it would make no difference to me if there were never another drop of liquor in the world; and yet to live under any régime of prohibition that I have so far had opportunity to observe would seem to me an appalling calamity. The ideals and instruments of Puritanism are simply unworthy of a free people, and, being unworthy, are soon found intolerable. Its hatreds, fanaticisms, inaccessibility to ideas; its inflamed and cancerous interest in the personal conduct of others; its hysterical disregard of personal rights; its pure faith in force, and above all, its tyrannical imposition of its own *Kultur*: these characterize and animate a civilization that the general experience of mankind at once condemns as impossible, and as hateful as it is impossible.

The drink problem is, as I said in my former paper in the REVIEW, by no means a problem of the first order, and it is perfectly open to a solution that is rational and consistent with a type of civilization appropriate to this country. It can be solved by a process analogous to the "Safety First" movement directed against the far more important problem of industrial accidents, or like the movement for a "safe and sane" Fourth of July. These reforms were effected in perfectly cool temper, without any rampant orgy of law-making, and without involving any reflection on either our national dignity or intelligence. Contrast them, for instance, with our ill-considered and ineffectual handling of the problem of the white slave traffic, resulting in the stupidities of the Mann Act—the most efficient agent of blackmail, probably, that any Government ever devised. There is no reason why the United States might not become a sufficiently temperate nation without the sacrifices required by prohibition.

Why might not some State, for instance, make a simple experiment in differential taxation; and with that, why might not some community take up the problem of retail distribution,—the saloon problem,—with seriousness and commonsense, providing such a type of resort as exists everywhere on the Continent and is being introduced in Eng-

land? Such a policy as this is constructive, not negative, and, when laid down, is done with once for all. A graded tax bearing very heavily on high alcoholic content, and a method of retail distribution modelled after the Public-House Trust: if any State should make this constructive experiment, it would be interesting to compare the results with those that are to be observed in Kansas or in any other State that has embarked on a course of prohibition.

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